

‘So shiny, so chrome’: Images and ideology of humans, machines, and the Earth in George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Michael W. Pesses
Antelope Valley College

Forthcoming in *cultural geographies*
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474018787308>

Abstract

Mad Max: Fury Road has been critiqued for its feminist, masculine, biblical, and environmental themes, but these critiques fail to engage with the connection between humans, machines, and the Earth in *Fury Road*. Nuclear technology may have produced the apocalyptic wasteland in which the film is set, but machines and industrial technology remain coupled to humanity to the point of symbiosis. Through the images of *Fury Road*, director George Miller reveals an ideology of ecomobility that demands an assemblage of human and machine. To exist in the wild and desolate spaces of the Earth is to become one with machines. Further, despite the distraction of subjective violence, the film is a critique of the ideological fantasy of modernity’s regime of automobility and its connection to capitalism.

Keywords: Anthropocene; automobilities; ecomobilities; *Mad Max*; Slavoj Žižek;

Buckling in: Introduction

George Miller’s 2015 film, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, is violent, fast, loud—furious, I suppose sums it up best—yet it still manages to demand interpretations of its noticeably spartan and linear storytelling. The film is so linear, in fact, that it consists of a drive out and back; the characters do not even loop their journey to cover new ground. Wives escape from a warlord, they turn around, they take over the warlord’s compound, the end. The characters are like sharks; they move to remain alive. Critiques of the film see it as a feminist action film, a feminist failure due to its excessive violence, masculinity in crisis, a biblical exodus, and an environmental warning.¹ Yet, none of these readings of the film take into account the interplay of humans, machines, and the Earth in *Fury Road*. Can anyone sincerely argue that the vehicles of *Fury Road* are less important to the film than the women? It is clear from the outset that Miller is blaming a modern dependence on oil for the nuclear wasteland in which the characters inhabit, but he falls short of suggesting a resistance to the automobile. In fact, to read *Fury Road* as a

resistance to a patriarchal system of machinic mobility is too simple. This film is a celebration of machines that are imbricated into ideologies of capitalism, while it simultaneously critiques the violence of capitalism that leads to such an apocalyptic wasteland. *Fury Road* reveals an ideology of ecomobility, that is, a way in which human bodies ought to move through the Earth's ecosystems. This specific ecomobility blends human and machine into the only assemblage/hybrid capable of travelling the wild and desolate spaces of this apocalyptic wasteland. Miller has made a film that reveals the complexity of automobility, a system that is both positive and negative in its effects upon the Earth.

In what follows, I show the interplay of automobility and ecomobility in *Fury Road*. This paper proceeds in four parts. First, Max, the film's titular character, is introduced to provide context for the film as well as my reading of it. I then explore the ideology of automobility within which the film was made and use Žižek's ideas on ideological distancing to explore automobility's durability. Next, I explore the connection between humans and automobile and show how *Fury Road* complicates prevailing notions of human/machine assemblages in automobility studies. I call for a greater focus on hybridity and the complicated relationship between humans, machines, and the environment. Finally, I argue that fixating on the over-the-top vehicles of *Fury Road*, like fixating on the evils of Sport Utility Vehicles, masks the underlying violence of capitalism itself. The violence of the men and women of the wasteland are the images upon which we are meant to fixate in the film, but such images actually get in the way of a pure critique of automobility. Rather, Miller's critique of the underlying capitalist structures of automobility only peeks through the wild car chases and explosions. It is the ideological violence of capitalism driving our systems of mobility that led to Max's world, not

simply the internal combustion engine. This over-the-top action film provides a means to questioning the ideological distancing at work in automobility.

When I use the concept of automobility, I am invoking John Urry's playful definition:

On the one hand, 'auto' refers reflexively to the humanist self, such as the meaning of 'auto' in autobiography or autoerotic. On the other hand, 'auto' refers to objects or machines that possess a capacity for movement, as expressed by automatic, automaton, and especially automobile. This double resonance of 'auto' is suggestive of how the car-driver is a 'hybrid' assemblage, not simply of autonomous humans but simultaneously of machines, roads, buildings, signs and entire cultures of mobility.²

Urry sees automobility as not only about the automobile, though driving one is clearly a part of the system of automobility. Further, these machines, at least so far as the technology exists at the time of this writing, must fuse with humans in order to move and are "only able to roam in certain time-space scapes."³ Humans and automobiles assemble in a specific time and space; this type of mobility demands it.

Böhm et al. make the claim that automobility is impossible to maintain. Automobility is three things: an important, modern institution, an ideology, and a specific phenomenological way of experiencing the world.⁴ It is so pervasive and power-laden that Böhm et al. use "regime" in place of "system" to fully describe how this specific mobility impacts contemporary society. Echoing Foucault's "where there is power, there is resistance," Böhm et al. argue that automobility has been historically and recently contested and the question is, how has such a regime maintained its grasp of power?⁵ Their answer is equally Foucauldian:

The attribution of deviance to alternatives to the car means that those advocating such alternatives have trouble articulating successfully their own regime of truth regarding cars—we don't believe their statements of 'fact' because they are already regarded as deviant.⁶

Power relations are so layered into mobility practices that subjects are not free to move through spaces without the aid of the automobile. But, is it as simple as that? Does the modern subject

not ride a bicycle to the store because of the practice's deviance? There are clearly negative endings presented by the automobile (car accidents, climate change, oil dependency, resource-based wars) that are accepted as 'fact' by drivers. And yet, modern humans struggle to envision a mobility free of internal combustion driven machines. Where Böhm et al. see regimes of truth producing a society in which self-propelled machines are the only way in which to move through space, that very *space* is overlooked. A focus on ecomobility, exploring how space and mobility operate in dialectical tension rather than passive and active roles, respectively, as well as a deeper study of ideology will open new possibilities for automobility studies. Those certain "time-space scapes" of which Urry speaks should not be thought of as abstract spatio-temporal planes, but rather material ecosystems through which humans move. Paul Groth has written that humans not being able to read the landscape is "like fish that can't see the water."⁷ Urban planners will look to the city as a cure for automobility and its environmental problems, but mobility outside of dense urban living is something entirely different.⁸ We must also look at the un(der)developed spaces through which humans move. There are spaces of the world that the bicycle is not selected to help travel through, not because of its deviance, but because it is not the proper machine with which to assemble. The proper assemblage depends on the landscape.

It may seem odd to use a bizarre narrative film to draw attention to the material ecologies through which automobility roams and its resulting ideology, but Miller's film lays bare the seemingly absurd nature of automobility. This automobility regime is presented absurdly, which allows the underlying workings of automobility to briefly become visible for the film's spectators. It is worth considering that if the characters of *Fury Road* cannot remove the ideological framings of automobility to construct a world free of a dependence on the internal combustion engine, what hope do the rest of us have?

Ignition: Meeting Max

The film's prologue opens with nothing but Max Rockatansky's (Tom Hardy) voice stating, "My world is fire and blood." His gravelly voice is replaced by a cacophony of news reports discussing first oil and then water wars being waged due to the lack of these important resources. While the former is necessary for the biological continuation of life, the latter is only necessary for powerful machine-assisted mobility. Immediately, Miller has tipped his ideological hand. Water and oil hold the same weight and the haunting sounds layered upon a dark screen focus the viewer on this fact. Max's world may be fire and blood, but that is only due to the fact that this world is lacking water and oil.

The voices shift from speaking of geopolitical news reports and commentary to comparing this new life to disease and decay. "The Earth is sour," says a woman's voice. "Our bones are poisoned, speaks another. "We have become half-life," claims a third. Max resumes his monologue, "it was hard to know who was more crazy... me, or everyone else." The black screen cuts to Max pissing on barren red soil, his heavily modified Ford Falcon V-8 Interceptor parked next to him. Max and machine are framed by two rugged buttes with a desolate valley stretching out to the horizon. The camera pedestals down to a two-headed lizard which we are to assume is the result of nuclear war. The lizard scurries off towards Max, who without turning, squishes it with his boot heel. He quickly grabs it and shoves the lizard into his mouth, noisily chewing. What first appears as animal cruelty is clearly a matter of survival in the desert.

The lizard consumed, Max moves into action. There is a montage of Max picking up his bedroll, assembling his few belongings and getting into his car. Far from subtle, the quick, discontinuous cuts are layered with the sounds of engines, not just revving, but moving near and far. Max himself is not moving much, but the soundscape matched with images of the car and the

gear necessary to live in this wilderness produce a space of ideological ecomobility. Miller's aural and visual montage reinforce the viewer's ideological spectacles of an oil-driven ecomobility.⁹ Max's existence in this wilderness demands a gasoline-burning vehicle in addition to his rucksack full of utensils and a bedroll. An assemblage *must* occur. Miller's layering of image and sound not only develop this idea, but the montage produces mobility even where there is no movement. Eisenstein's "association montage" is at play, in which the montage of shots produces a dynamic subject, "not in the field of space but of psychology."¹⁰ The viewer understands the movement mentally if he or she is within the ideology of automobility.

Max speeds off into the valley below; his dust dissipates as does the sound of his car. This is the same framing from the opening scene, presenting the viewer with the desert wilderness free of humans and machines. This natural space is now quiet and looks untouched. What should be coded as peaceful nature is discomfiting. Our unease comes from nature's stillness. Fortunately, the calm is broken by motorcycles and trucks driving into the shot, angrily chasing Max. The machines belong in this space.

Max is quickly captured and his voice tells us he is "a man reduced to a single instinct... survive." Survival means operating within a specific ecomobility in this wilderness.

Idling: Ideologies of automobility

George Miller made a film about a possible near future, but he was working within a definite time and space, specifically at the beginning of the Anthropocene, the proposed geologic point in which humans got into the driver's seat of the Earth's climate. While the Anthropocene starts in the eighteenth century with the beginning of significant fossil fuel use, the concept is a twenty-first century one.¹¹ The warming, changing climate is clearly happening due to human causes, hence the epoch's name, and the automobile has been held as a major culprit in adding

carbon dioxide to the atmosphere and increasing our greenhouse gases.¹² If oil wars don't lead to Miller's nuclear wasteland, our oil dependence threatens to destroy Earth regardless.

Yet, the call for sustainable transportation continues unheeded. The automobile has undergone technological changes of more efficient fuel consumption, electric motors, and so on, but even such 'green' progress does not stop the system of automobility. In fact, those very green improvements designed to reduce the environmental effects of the automobile actually increase fuel consumption. Yes, efficient hybrid cars use less fuel than a comparably sized non-hybrid, but the technology leads to driving more miles at the same cost rather than conservation of fuel.¹³ What this tells us is that automobility is not about rational decisions, nor is it a simple regime of truth. Urry refers to "cultures of mobility,"¹⁴ but what happens if we instead focus on Böhm et al.'s ideologies of mobility? While ideology can evoke something like 'false consciousness,' that is, subjects are too dumb to know what they do, a more thoughtful analysis may prove useful. Slavoj Žižek has worked to rehabilitate ideology, setting it alongside Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics. For Žižek, a key part of ideology is that it relies on fantasy to prevent its collapse. First, in his concept of the "ideological fantasy," Žižek states that ideology works on a double illusion. It is not that subjects do not know what they do, rather "they know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know."¹⁵ The subject overlooks the illusion that structures reality and does so within the social field. It is not the case that other forms of automobility are surreptitiously made deviant; we can see through this, but we choose to maintain such an illusion. Even if we distance ourselves from the negative effects of automobility by purchasing a Prius, we are still fully, if not more, enmeshed in automobility. In fact, the act of buying a car with an electric motor conforms to Žižek's "fetishistic disavowal" that maintains a distance from a pure conformity to ideology to allow for

the continuation of that ideology.¹⁶ He uses the example of Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. Vincent D'Onofrio's character fully conforms to discipline and ideology of the military, which ends in murder that does not advance the military's goals. Mathew Modine's character however, maintains an ironic distance from the ideology, which allows him to be fully hailed by the ideological power. "He is the one in whom the interpellation by the military big Other has fully succeeded; he is the fully constituted military subject."¹⁶ If we take automobility to be an ideology in the same vein, how would a hybrid vehicle accomplish the fetishistic disavowal? Böhm et al. signal automobility's environmental impossibilities:

A second antagonism, which seems well established and understood today, points to the concerns about ecological sustainability of the contemporary regime of automobility... It contributes significantly to the depletion of non-renewable resources, notably oil (including production of plastics), rubber, platinum, lead, aluminum and iron.¹⁷

This depletion of non-renewable resources is the impetus for the hybrid automobile. By reducing the oil consumed, one can resist the regime of automobility. But, such a distancing from the willful waste of oil is in fact a way to overlook the illusion of the ideological fantasy of automobility. 'Conserving' fuel while not reducing mobility reinforces automobility's call to the subject. This is not resistance at all but a strengthening of this regime of power. Automobility is certainly not resisted by better fuel efficiency; wasteful automobility continues through the effort to curb fuel consumption and emissions that allows more cars to be sold and more fuel to be burned each year.¹⁹ Not only are oil and iron consumed, but new minerals are mined for the new batteries now needed. Perhaps the answer to why automobility persists is to be found in our willingness to distance ourselves from it.

Revving: Hybrid humans and machines

Max's car is more than a generic object. The V-8 Interceptor connects *Fury Road* to the previous three Mad Max films as well as establishes the complex nature of human and machine.

The car is connected to Max, but not fused to him. The term hybrid does not fully explain the relationship, as it indicates an offspring from the mating of human and machine. Tim Dant suggests in its place 'assemblage.'

The particular driver-car may be assembled from different components with consequent variations in ways of acting, and its modal form may vary over time and place. However, despite variations, the assemblage of the driver-car enables a form of social action that has become routine and habitual, affecting many aspects of late modern society... Neither the human driver nor the car acting apart could bring about the types of action that the assemblage can; it is the particular ways in which their capacities are brought together that bring about the impact of the automobile on modern societies.²⁰

Max and his V-8 Interceptor can separate, which happens quickly in *Fury Road*. Another component of this driver-car assemblage is that Max can assemble with other machines throughout the film when the need arises. Max needs a machine to survive in this apocalyptic landscape, for, as Dant argues above, "neither the human driver nor the car acting apart could bring about the types of action that the assemblage can." This assemblage is necessary for specific practice, which ultimately means survival in this wilderness. One cannot exist in this space without such an assemblage. Further, the film does not present practices or ideologies in place of automobility. The breeding harem that escapes from Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne) does so in a large truck. The women living in 'The Green Place' use motorcycles. No one operates outside of the ideology of automobility, no one has a practice completely free of an assemblage between driver and car.

The use of assemblage evokes Deleuze and Guattari, though Dant states that similarity of the term to their "machinic assemblage" is "coincidental."²¹ Yet, I would argue that both assemblages should be set against one another to fully understand the messiness of bodies and machines. Deleuze and Guattari offer the machinic assemblage as a conception of bodies interacting with other bodies, while an "assemblage of enunciation" refers to written and spoken

language. These concepts connect to their larger project of linguistics and the relationship between sign and signifier, but these ideas are not that different from Dant's concept of the driver-car. Deleuze and Guattari describe a tetravalent assemblage, a four-part bonding of connections that comprise the greater machinic assemblage. The Earth is connected to social groups and there are class/status connections, but, using feudal Europe as an example, they also connect "the body of the knight and the horse to their new relation to the stirrup" as well as "the weapons and tools assuring a symbiosis of bodies."²² Deleuze and Guattari are connecting human and tool as a symbiosis, an ecological term describing organisms working together, but not necessarily fusing into a hybrid. This machinic assemblage is but one side; mobility, or "deterritorialization," is also important for assemblages in general. Deleuze and Guattari hold the Crusades as an example. The knight and horse assemble, but they are also moving to the East, which cannot be ignored.²³ Deterritorialization is a "line of flight," movement that causes a temporary break in a structure. For Deleuze and Guattari this nomadic behavior, either literal or figurative, strips the assemblage of base and superstructure by flattening relations.²⁴ Deterritorialization is a positive for Deleuze and Guattari; to flatten is to exist horizontally, rhizomatically. Mobility is becoming. We should not dig down and follow roots in an effort to find answers, but instead chase a line of flight and see what happens. This has bigger implications for ideology, which, they bluntly claim, is a concept that does not exist.²⁵

The rejection of ideology is problematic. Deleuze and Guattari are working toward a completely material philosophy here, but saying ideology does not exist does not make it so. As Žižek argues, distancing one's self from ideology does not prevent one from acting in accordance with ideology.²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari state that the answer lies in the "intermingling of bodies in a society" which ultimately is rooted in food and sex. Further:

Even technology makes the mistake of considering tools in isolation: tools exist only in relation to the interminglings they make possible... The stirrup entails a new man-horse symbiosis that at the same time entails new weapons and new instruments. Tools are inseparable from symbioses... defining a Nature-Society machinic assemblage... a society is defined by its amalgamations, not its tools.²⁷

This strikes me as being far from coincidentally connected to Dant's driver-car assemblage.

More importantly, however, is the fact that assemblages, symbioses, and amalgamations of bodies and objects do not preclude ideology. Bodies may assemble with machines to ultimately gain sustenance and reproduce, but such an assemblage does not produce drones driven by biological urges. Ideology, disconnected from reality as it may be, is a factor in how bodies intermingle. And, most importantly, why must a line of flight, something Deleuze and Guattari hold as preceding urban limits and national borders, be free of ideology? *Fury Road* shows that mobility and ideology can be one and the same.

It is important to state that, despite all of this assemblage talk, hybridization also occurs in the film. While the assemblage is necessary for action and mobility, the hybridization of human and machine is also imperative for survival. Dant uses his assemblage concept precisely to reject the idea of a cyborg or hybrid relationship between humans and machine, but a film like *Fury Road* challenges the *temporary* nature of humans and machines working together. After Max has been captured and subdued by the War Boys, the prologue is over, and the film cuts to a close up of Imperator Furiosa's (Charlize Theron) neck as she walks away from the camera. She has been branded with the image of a skull-emblazoned, flaming steering wheel, therefore literally connecting her to automobility. We will learn that this is the symbol of Immortan Joe's War Boys, one tribe of many in this machine-driven world. The camera follows Furiosa, but slowly so that she pulls away, revealing her robotic prosthetic arm. The *mise-en-scene* is a blur of flesh and metal. We see that she is a cyborg but simultaneously her walking away reveals that

she is moving towards several assemblages of the War Boys and their machines. To her left is one on a motorcycle, to her right is a devilish hot rod with a machine gun mounted to the top, the gunner standing at the back of the car. Another motorcycle and rider are just behind the car. Her 'War Rig,' a heavily armored semi-truck with human skulls adorning the front bumper, sits in the background (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Meeting Furiosa through ideological framing.

The prologue establishes Max as needing his machine for survival, but this scene introducing Furiosa takes the ideology further by blurring the lines separating human and machine. Yes, Dant's driver-car assemblage is relevant, but it is not the only thing at work in this scene. Furiosa is able to assemble with her truck because she has fused with a machine.

The scene cuts to a tanker trailer on a platform being lowered by a series of pulleys and massive chains. Pale War Boys, called 'half-life' to denote their bodies decaying from the effects

of the nuclear war, surround the trailer. These simple machines are another assemblage; human bodies increase their strength by assembling with the pulleys. The scene cuts to Furiosa climbing into the cab of her truck. She uses both her organic and her metal hand to place a steering wheel onto the steering column. The steering wheel matches the brand on her neck. As soon as the wheel is locked in, the scene cuts to a close up of Immortan Joe's hideously scarred and blistered back. A young half-life blows dust onto Joe's back while another holds his arm. Immortan Joe releases a deep, phlegmy cough. Cut to Furiosa's War Rig, the trailer is fully lowered and connected to her truck. Cut to Immortan Joe's back; a protective plastic plate is placed onto it. Cut to the trailer. Cut to Joe's front, his head is still cut out of the shot. The front plate is hooked to the back, his entire torso is covered. The front of his plastic vest is molded in the shape of a muscular torso, though his body is far removed from the idealized plastic abdominal muscles. His half-life assistants place an impressive codpiece at the bottom of the plastic. It is a large, round metal gear. Flames are welded to the back and a metal skull is in the center front. Cut to a long shot of the truck. War Boys are finalizing their work. Cut back to Immortan Joe's face as he places a breathing mask up to his mouth and nose. The mask is a mix of skeletal teeth and tubes, yet another hybrid of the organic and metallic, bringing oxygen into Joe's system. We will never see Immortan Joe without this mask and it will only be removed at the end of the film in a rather violent manner.

Miller is playing with Eisenstein's dialectical montage here. The ideology is not apparent in the individual frames but the collision of the machine being assembled by men and a man being turned into a machine produces something new intellectually.²⁸ Miller has blended human and machine so well that even the distinction between hybrid and assemblage becomes messy. Imaging these humans living free of machines becomes impossible. Dant's temporary driver-car

assemblage explains the fusion of Max and his V-8 Interceptor. Deleuze and Guattari's fixation on horizontal movement explains the constant motion in which we find the film's characters. Most significantly though, is an underlying, permanent fusion of flesh and metal. Even if a character like Furiosa can physically step away from her War Rig, she still needs it to survive in her world.

Throughout the film this play of assemblage and hybrid, human and machine continues. Lactating women are hooked up to massive breast pumps to industrialize the production of milk. The platform that raises and lowers vehicles is comprised of machines, but it is driven not by burning hydrocarbons, but rather by slaves moving massive paddlewheels with their bodies. Max's "full-life" body will be strapped to a car to serve as a blood bag for the Half-life War Boy Nux (Nicholas Hoult). Nux has a picture of a V-8 car engine carved into his chest. Even the film's musical score is a hybrid of diegetic and non-diegetic sound. The hammering of percussion and guitar (electric of course) as Immortan Joe and his Half-life War Boys chase Furiosa pervasively fills the film's scenes, but is clearly emanating from one of the vehicles. The pounding of the drums matches the pounding of cylinders in the engines. Are these drummers in war or a film score? Is there a difference? Everything blurs. Again, the fact that Miller has made this film at the start of the Anthropocene is relevant. "Climate change makes the global atmosphere, its chemistry and weather systems, into Frankenstein's monster—part natural, part made."²⁹ Even nature is a hybrid.

Shifting into 4L: Sport utility vehicles, distancing, and capitalism

The vehicles in *Fury Road* are not simply automobiles. They may have been prior to the oil and water wars, but not a single vehicle is stock. All of them have been modified to maximize power and weaponize the vehicles to maximize survival. Roads exist in the film's landscape,

though none are paved. They are long stretches of compacted red sediment that demand off-road capabilities. The world of *Mad Max* is full of Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs).

SUVs are seen as one of the fundamental problems with automobility. Mimi Sheller argues that these vehicles are prized more for their emotional rather than off-road capabilities. Even the SUV's habitat, nature, is produced:

So-called 'Sport Utility Vehicles' also continue to be embraced as a way of getting closer to nature (safely). Ironically, the very idea of 'nature' that many anti-car campaigners are defending may have been constituted largely through automobility.³⁰

Sheller argues that nature and industrial society are not as inseparable as it may seem. Of course, what Sheller does not include is that nature has always been produced by the cultures that inhabit it. European nature is a different space than American Indian nature, for example.³¹ Nature is a hybrid.

Off-road automobility has also been given animalistic qualities. As Nicole Shukin writes, "The [Saturn] *Vue* – 'at home in almost any environment' – is just one SUV among many eager to neutralize political antagonisms of automobility culture."³² Giving an SUV an 'environment' rather than placing it into the spaces of capitalism and transport cloud its materiality.

[A]n unabashed identification of automobile and animal emerges with the *Vue* ads. By equating automobility with the biological ignition of animal life, the *Vue* discourse mythologizes the motive power of the sport utility vehicle and conceals the economy of power regulating a carnivorously capitalistic relation of nature and culture.³³

The mythologizing of which Shukin speaks is not unexpected in the ideology of automobility, nor ecomobility. If our mobility choices revolve around us travelling through 'natural' space, does it not follow that humans would connect this mobility to more ecological terms? Further, the hybridized and social production of nature makes an ontologically pure wilderness impossible. It must be remembered that the ideologies of auto- and ecomobility should not be

simply criticized for their obfuscation of the material world. Rather, one must ask, what work does such obfuscation do for automobility's subjects? Does not the blurring of boundaries resemble Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization? The driver of an SUV is not connected to the roots of modern environmentalism and the production of knowledge about nature, but rather moves in between urban and the wild spaces as a means of becoming. Nature, car, human assemble across horizontal space. This is not so much a critique of the concept of nature in the ideology of automobility (though this should continue to be questioned), but rather a critique of why the subject desires to drive through ecologies on the planet.

Mark Dery laments the state of American roads: "the bullying SUV and its even nastier, more brutish successor, the Hummer—two giant steps backward for fuel efficiency, passenger safety, and inconspicuous consumption—are the undisputed Kings of the Road in America."³⁴ Bullying, nasty, brutish—the SUV is a machine of violence, which Dery sees fusing psychologically with the driver.

The concern with the violence of SUVs and the nature in which they belong is a distraction though. Nature is clearly complicated, but so too violence is more complicated than the aggressive styling of an SUV. Returning to Žižek, we can split violence into three types: subjective, symbolic, and systemic.³⁵ Subjective violence is the overt violence of a film like *Fury Road*. When the dying half-life sprays silver paint into his mouth and demands his brothers witness his *kamikaze* destruction of the spikey "Buzzard" rig, we are taken by the spectacle of violence. While this violence is meant to entertain, it also distracts from what is additionally at work in the world of *Fury Road*. Žižek's systemic violence is the most interesting form in connection with automobility. This is the violence that occurs when structures and systems *are running as they should*. A new breed of capitalist, what Žižek calls a "liberal communist" works

to stop the subjective violence of poverty, disease, malnutrition, all the while masking that the ideology of capitalism is responsible for those very problems. "The same philanthropists who give millions for AIDS or education in tolerance have ruined the lives of thousands through financial speculation and thus created the conditions for the rise of the very intolerance that is being fought."³⁶ It is not that Žižek is discounting the severity of the AIDS epidemic; this is a horrible disease that should be eradicated. The problem is that the capitalists giving to the research to fight the disease are using the ideology of humanitarianism to mask the violence of the capitalist ideology.

How does this connect to automobility? Whether we are discussing the subjective violence of aggressive SUV styling in contemporary America or the subjective violence of *Fury Road's* characters on their motorcycles, monster trucks, and the War Rig, we run the risk of ignoring or overlooking the systemic violence of automobility. For modern American automobile choices, the critique of the bullying SUV masks the subjective violence of the Prius. Again, fuel efficiency does not reduce fuel consumption, but the Lacanian Real of the ideology of automobility tells us that by purchasing more hybrid vehicles we are saving the planet. Per Žižek, "'reality' is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable 'abstract,' spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality."³⁷ Ideology is not something a subject uses to escape reality, but instead comes from the Real to allow a subject to make sense of reality. Further, ideology does not fully succeed in grabbing the subject in an Althusserian sense. We need not fully embrace automobility for it to be durable. Purchasing a hybrid automobile would appear to be a failure of a perfect submission to the ideology, yet Žižek sees that gap between interpellation and subject as the very site of subject formation.³⁸ Ideological fantasy works to

structure reality. We know very well that occasionally using electricity to move a vehicle does not erase its impact on the environment, but automobility tells us that there is no other reasonable way in which to move across that environment. It is not that reality fails to provide alternatives, but rather, the Real of automobility “succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself.”³⁹ In *Fury Road* the subjective violence that seemingly drives this action film, actually gets in the way of a true critique of the Real of automobility. There are hints at the ideological violence that caused the world of *Fury Road* throughout the film. The oil and water wars, the nuclear destruction, the roving tribes of brutish half-lives driving equally brutish off-road vehicles are simply the most visible forms of violence. Underlying all of this is capitalism.

Early in the film, Immortan Joe reaches his vault and sees that his prized breeding wives are gone. Graffiti, we are to assume were written by the wives, covers the walls. “WE ARE NOT THINGS” says one. “OUR BABIES WILL NOT BE WARLORDS” says another. But most importantly “WHO KILLED THE WORLD?” is scrawled over the vault’s entrance. This same question is asked to Nux by Immortan Joe’s favorite wife, Splendid (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley), later in the film. It would be easy to read this as a feminist environmental message of the Gaia variety. Men killed the world by poisoning the atmosphere. But, when placed alongside the other images of the film, it becomes more likely that it wasn’t men *qua* men that killed the world, but rather men *qua* capitalists that did so. The commodification of resources—water, oil, wombs—is the real villain of the film, despite the clear subjective violence of Immortan Joe.

Capitalism, and specifically the formation of commodities drives automobility. In the scene in which Max first walks up to Furiosa and the wives, he demands they bring him water. Splendid, who is clearly pregnant, carries a dripping hose. The shot is framed so that we see her

swollen belly and the hose together. Both the child and the water are commodities to be used by men. Immortan Joe holds power because his home sits atop an aquifer. Water is not even called water by Joe, but instead 'Aqua-Cola' to fully make it a commodity and something transcendent.⁴⁰ "Because he owns it, he owns all of us," explains one of his wives. His babies have a use value in that they can grow up to fight other tribes. All of this revolves around the vehicles that must be driven to Gas Town for more "guzzoline" (gasoline) and the Bullet Farm for more ammunition. One can no longer travel the Earth without the aid of a powerful and aggressive automobile. This Earth demands automobility of a specific kind, which means commodities drive the world of *Fury Road*.

One of the more disturbing characters in the film is The People Eater, a grotesque man who must be lifted into his vehicle by a number of half-lives. He is an accountant ensuring that capitalism is not forgotten. As Immortan Joe pursues his escaped wives, The People Eater reminds him, "We are down 30,000 units of guzzoline, 19 canisters of nitro, 12 assault bikes, seven pursuit vehicles. The deficit mounts, and now sir, you have us stuck in a quagmire!" The subjective violence is fine as long as it does not impact the Real of capitalism. The gasoline burning off-road vehicles are necessary for survival; but the violence of capitalism killed the world.

Another of Joe's escaped wives, The Dag (Abbey Lee), speaks to The Keeper of Seeds (Melissa Jaffer), one of the Many Mothers of The Green Place. The Keeper of Seeds makes a comment about "snapping" people, meaning shooting them. The Dag responds to this display of yet more subjective violence by saying that these women should be above it. This is how we know that the film isn't just a feminist message. The Keeper of Seeds shows The Dag her bag of seeds and explains what they are. "Trees. Flowers. Fruit. Back then, everyone had their fill. Back

then, there was no need to snap anybody.” When resources were plentiful, subjective violence did not have to exist. When resources grew scarce, and men like Immortan Joe hoarded them, subjective violence became necessary. The violence of capitalism killed the world.

Throttle down: Conclusions

Mad Max: Fury Road is a violent and aggressive film, but that should not distract from the systemic violence of capitalism and automobility. The ideology of automobility, specifically excessive American automobility, may appear impossible to sustain, but it avoids crises through the ideological fantasy that masks the violence it commits upon the Earth and upon bodies. The absurdity of *Fury Road*, the over-the-top vehicles and characters assembling for mobility, lay bare the ideology of both automobility and ecomobility. While Miller’s overt violence committed by his characters distracts from the systemic violence, he nonetheless has made a film that uses absurdity to force the viewer’s awareness of ideology. Ecomobility is revealed in the need for humans and machines to assemble to travel over the specific ecosystems of the film. Figure 2 shows Max positioned between the War Rig that got him to what was left of The Green Place and the motorcycle that could take him towards his next destination. The monstrous styling of the War Rig and the ruggedness of the motorcycle strips the subtlety of Miller’s message. The red sand cannot be traversed without one of these machines. An assemblage must occur for Max to survive as an organism within this ecosystem. The burning of fuel is his ecological niche. The underlying ideological need for machinic mobility is not questioned.



Figure 2. The ecomobility assemblages of *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

Automobility's ideology is also presented through the images and dialogue in *Fury Road*. Humans and machines assemble without questioning the need to do so. This is more than assemblage in Dant's use of the word, in which drivers and cars temporarily fuse as needed. Humans and machines also do not assemble to push for deterritorialization as Deleuze and Guattari would have it. Humans and machines and their environments are hybrids that at least appear to require a symbiotic relationship. Humans need machines to exist in the environment of *Fury Road*. Yet that apparent need for automobility gets at the ideological fantasy at work. The outlandish nature of this assemblage and hybridization reveals just how far we distance ourselves from modernity's regime of automobility. We see how over-the-top Immortan Joe's fleet of vehicles are, which at first glance might reveal the problems of automobility. Yet, *The People Eater* shows that capitalism commits the real violence in the assemblage. Automobility exists for

profit. The question we are left with is what does a resistance of automobility look like? Certainly not a Prius. Resistance does not mean an end to internal combustion, but instead a questioning of commodification. The women returning to and taking over Immortan Joe's Citadel are not ending the assemblage/hybridization of human and machine. We are to assume that water will now be shared. The end of the commodification of natural resources is what this violent road trip accomplished. Max of course disappears into the desert; his mobility cannot be arrested.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Eve Oishi, Joseph Ruanto-Ramirez, and Jamey Keeton as well as the anonymous reviewers for their excellent critiques of this paper.

Notes

1. K. Smith, "Why 'Mad Max: Fury Road' is the Feminist Picture of the Year," *New York Post*, 14 May, 2015. <http://nypost.com/2015/05/14/why-mad-max-fury-road-is-the-feminist-picture-of-the-year/>; P. Chin, "The Problem with 'Mad Max' Feminism," *Christianity Today*, 3 June, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june-web-only/problem-with-mad-max-feminism.html>; A. de Coning, "Recouping Masculinity: Men's Rights Activists' Responses to *Mad Max: Fury Road*," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 1, pp. 174-76; Y. Klangwisan, "*Mad Max Fury Road*: Escaping the Phallic Economy of the Exodus," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 12, 2016, pp. 75-86; A. Lane, "High Gear: 'Mad Max: Fury Road'," *The New Yorker*, 25 May, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/25/high-gear-current-cinema-anthony-lane>; S. Hawk, "The Fury Behind *Fury Road*," *Sierra*, 9 April, 2015, <http://sierraclub.org/sierra/2015-3-may-june/feature/fury-road-all-your-darkest-environmental-nightmares-come-true>
2. J. Urry, "Inhabiting the car," *The Sociological Review* 54, no. s1, 2006, p. 18.
3. Urry, "Inhabiting," p.18.
4. S. Böhm, C. Jones, C. Land, and M. Paterson, "Introduction: Impossibilities of automobility," *The Sociological Review* 54, no. s1, 2006, p. 3.
5. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990 [1978]), p. 95.
6. Böhm et al., "Introduction," p.8.

7. P. Groth, "Frameworks for cultural landscape study," in P. Groth and T.W. Bressi (eds) *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 1.
8. E. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011); J. Speck, *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America One Step at a Time* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012).
9. S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008 [1989]), p. 25.
10. S. Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1949), pp. 49-52.
11. J.R. McNeill and P. Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 2.
12. Böhm et al., "Introduction," pp. 9-11; Urry, "Inhabiting," p. 18.
13. D. Owens, *The Conundrum: How Scientific Innovation, Increased Efficiency, and Good Intentions Can Make Our Energy and Climate Problems Worse* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011), p. 95; J. Linn, *The Rebound Effect for Passenger Vehicles* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 2013); Also see R. Dowling and C. Simpson, "'Shift-the way you move': Reconstituting automobility," *Continuum* 27, no. 3, 2013, p. 427.
14. Urry, "Inhabiting," p. 18.
15. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 30.
16. P. Kingsbury, "Uneasiness in Culture, or Negotiating the Sublime Distances Towards the Big Other," *Geography Compass* 11, no. 6, 2017, p. 8.
17. S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2008 [1997]), p. 27.
18. Böhm et al., p. 9
19. Owens, *Conundrum*, p. 102.
20. T. Dant, "The Driver-Car," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4/5, 2004, p. 62.
21. Dant, "Driver-Car," p. 75; G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980]), p. 88.
22. Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, p. 89.
23. Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, p. 9 & pp. 88-9.
24. Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, p. 90.
25. Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, p. 4.
26. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 30.
27. Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, p. 90.
28. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, pp. 82-3.
29. J. Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 15.
30. M. Sheller, "Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car," *Theory Culture Society* 21, 2004, p. 231.
31. C. Coté, *Spirits of our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalizing Makah and Nuw-chah-nulth Traditions* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).
32. N. Shukin, "The Mimetics of Mobile Capital" *The Sociological Review* 54, no. s1, 2006, p. 159.
33. Shukin, "Mimetics," p. 159.

34. M. Dery, "'Always Crashing in the Same Car': A Head-on Collision with the Technosphere," *The Sociological Review* 54, no. s1, 2006, p. 223.
35. S. Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), pp. 1-2.
36. Žižek, *Violence*, p. 37.
37. Žižek, *Violence*, p. 13.
38. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 43.
39. Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 49.
40. K. Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. by D. McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 42.